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From History to Memory: Alain Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour*

Abstract
This paper examines the representation of history and memory in Alain Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*. It argues that the film's privileging of subjective remembrance reflects a broader cultural interest in using memory as a counter discourse to established history. The widely documented cultural preoccupation with memory became particularly prominent in the early 1980s. However, *Hiroshima mon amour* can be read as an important early example of a film that pre-dates the contemporary 'memory boom'. For Resnais and Duras, the magnitude of the devastation in Hiroshima exceeds the limits of filmic representation. Their solution to the problem that the historic event is unrepresentable is to approach the event indirectly while focusing on an individual traumatic memory. Through a close analysis and critique of the film I argue that the film's emphasis on individual memory validates the legitimacy of the personal narrative but problematically subsumes the political events and displaces history from the discursive realm. I also suggest that problems emerge in the film's depiction of its traumatised female subject. While *Hiroshima mon amour* represents a complex female subjectivity and interiority, the process of remembrance depicted deprives the woman of agency and renders her trapped within a compulsive repetition of the past.

Hiroshima mon amour (1959), written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais, explores the ethical implications of memory, mourning and witnessing in relation to the filmic representation of traumatic events. The project began when Resnais was approached to make a documentary on the city of Hiroshima twelve years after the atomic bombing. However, after months of filming he abandoned the documentary genre, predominantly because he viewed it as an inappropriate form through which to represent such a traumatic event. For Resnais, the magnitude of the devastation in Hiroshima not only defied comprehension but also exceeded the limits of filmic representation. Resnais' decision highlights the moral and ethical risks inherent in reconstructing historical trauma through the medium of realist cinema, a genre that traditionally purports to invest its depictions of the past with authenticity. The documentary form would imply a 'truthful' and unmediated representation of the past, which in the case of the Hiroshima bombings was considered unachievable.

Resnais had already explored and problematised the relationship between memory, trauma and representation in his earlier film *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog,* 1955*)*, a documentary he was asked to make to mark the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. *Nuit et Brouillard* depicts the horror of the concentration camps through intensely disturbing visual images that are almost unbearable to look at, while continually reminding the viewer that the images do not and can not capture the truth of the past. The voice-over states: 'How to discover the reality of these camps, when it was despised by all those who made them and eluded those who suffered there?'. The film suggests that the sublime event is not only unrepresentable but in defiance of memory. In *Nuit et Brouillard,* history is presented not to capture the past but to create an awareness of present and future dangers.

Resnais had directly experienced the limitations of documentary filmmaking in *Nuit et Brouillard*, and with *Hiroshima mon amour* opted for an alternative approach towards the Hiroshima bombings. He decided to create a fictional narrative set in the city of Hiroshima that would incorporate the partial memory of the atomic bombing while focussing upon an individual experience of trauma. The film would include the

documentary footage that Resnais shot in Hiroshima but would challenge the notion that his images could account for the reality of the atomic devastation.

Resnais approached writer Marguerite Duras to write the fictional screenplay for the film. Resnais' view that the events of Hiroshima could not be represented through realistic film techniques reflects Duras' similar position that direct forms of representation often fail to adequately account for certain aspects of human experience. Duras' literature continually conveys her scepticism towards language and its tendency to solidify and fix memories that might better remain fluid as well as her concern with how to represent through language those aspects of experience that cannot be reduced to language. In Duras' texts, the unrepresentable occurs in instances of intense desire as in *L'Amant* (1984; *The Lover,* 1984) or in instances of trauma, war and death, as in *La Douleur* (1985). In these and other texts Duras is able to evoke the sublime and unrepresentable aspects of experience through the literary techniques of excess and negation. Her writing includes silences, gaps and ellipses to infer that the reconstruction of memory is always incomplete; that there are elements of the story that exceed the limitations of the narration. In the case of the Hiroshima bombing, Duras shared Resnais' belief that an indirect approach was the only appropriate and ethical strategy. In her synopsis of the published screenplay for the film, Duras writes that it is 'impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima.'[1]

Having established that the 'truth' of Hiroshima's traumatic past is unrepresentable, Resnais and Duras suggest that the personal narrative may offer a more productive avenue through which to reassess the past and reflect upon historical trauma. The narrative of *Hiroshima mon amour* involves a shift from an initial depiction of the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, which comprises Resnais' footage, to a focus upon a woman's personal memories of a series of traumatic experiences that took place in wartime France. These contradictory plot lines, genres and cinematic styles are brought together to examine the different (and at times similar) ways in which historical trauma is remembered and represented. The two narrative streams are metaphorically linked creating parallels between past and present, public and private, and history and memory.

This analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* will utilise the tools provided by contemporary memory theory to critique the film's representation of history and memory. I argue that the film's shift from historical event to personal memory is reflective of a broader cultural interest in using memory as a counter-discourse to normative historiography. Cultural critics such as Susannah Radstone, Jeanette Malkin and Andreas Huyssen have usefully traced the contemporary 'memory boom' in western culture, arguing that memory has become one of the defining themes within postmodern culture.[2] While Huyssen dates the cultural preoccupation with memory discourse from the early 1980s, I suggest that *Hiroshima mon amour* stands as an important early example of a film that challenges the reliability of historical discourses and privileges subjective remembrance.[3]

[1] Duras, 1961, p. 9.
[2] Radstone, 2000; Malkin, 1999; Huyssen, 1995, 2003.
[3] Huyssen, 1995, p. 3.

The increased cultural interest in memory discourses has advanced contemporary critiques of history, and provided a vital forum through which to rethink our experiences of time and temporality. However, the focus on the private, subjective aspects of memory and experience become problematic when they are emphasised at the expense of the historical and the political. In his book *Present Pasts*, Huyssen recognises the importance of memory discourses, yet he also challenges the binary opposition that has been established in recent academic debates between history and memory, arguing for the continued value of history within discourses of memory.[4] Huyssen further points to the problems inherent in any obsession with remembering the past that results in a subsequent forgetting of the future.[5] In the instance of highly traumatic memory, the need to envision the future is particularly pertinent.

An analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* in light of Huyssen's contentions reveals some of the problems that occur when personal memory is emphasised over history. While Duras and Resnais maintain a critical stance that conceives of the atomic bombing as unrepresentable, the film's increasing distance from its historical context risks erasing its specificity. By proposing that to represent Hiroshima is impossible, Duras and Resnais imply that the traumatic events are not only absent from representation and in the past, but always in excess of the domains of language, discourse and representation.

In the latter part of this paper, I turn to a focus on the film's representation of traumatic memory and its relationship to subjectivity: this can be productively read through a psychoanalytic framework. My discussion will draw upon Julia Kristeva's description of the melancholic as well as her brief critique of *Hiroshima mon amour* in *Black Sun.* Kristeva's discussion is particularly helpful in illuminating the problem that occurs when private suffering overshadows the public domains of history and politics. *Hiroshima mon amour* represents a complex female subjectivity and focuses explicitly upon the female point of view, which was exceptional around the time of the film's release in 1959. This revelation of a powerful female interiority worked considerably towards correcting the two dimensional images of women at the time, however it also linked her subjectivity to trauma and loss. While the woman's memories give her an interiority, as the narrative progresses her obsessive remembrance (and re-enactment) of her traumatic past threatens to override her sense of self in the present.

Published critiques of *Hiroshima mon amour* have increasingly focused on the depiction of traumatic memory in light of recent studies on trauma theory.[6] My discussion shifts away from this trend and focuses instead upon the role of memory in the (re)negotiation of female subjectivity. The literature on *Hiroshima mon amour* generally falls into one of two categories: some perform a literary critique, focusing upon the written text or scenario for the film, and thereby emphasise the importance of Duras' contribution,[7] while others centre upon filmic elements attributing the work predominantly to Resnais.[8] Rather than distinguishing between the written and filmic texts, I suggest that the film can best be understood through an examination of the

[4] Huyssen, 2003, p. 5.
[5] *ibid*, p. 6.
[6] See, for example Caruth, 1996; Roth, 1995.
[7] Willis, 1987; Hoffman, 1991; Kristeva, 1989.
[8] Roth, 1995; Fleishman, 1992; Kawin, 1992.

interaction between the two. This paper therefore reads *Hiroshima mon amour* as a collaborative project between Alain Renais and Marguerite Duras. Indeed the authorial presence of the writer and the director are equally apparent in this film as it resonates thematically and stylistically with other works by both creators such as Resnais' *Last year at Marienbad* (1961) and Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* (1964). Resnais' use of disjointed filming techniques and his concern with how to depict the processes of remembering and forgetting on film are again present in his later film, and Duras' later texts continued her investigation of the relationship between traumatic memory and the female subject. As in all of Duras' texts, one also senses the possible integration of autobiographical elements in *Hiroshima mon amour,* and indeed the narrative of the film conveys some underlying similarities with Duras' diary entries in *La Douleur* (1985) and her personal experiences of love, loss and trauma during the war.

The present-day narrative of *Hiroshima mon amour* centres upon a chance encounter between a French woman (Emmanuelle Riva) and a Japanese man (Eiji Okada) who remain unnamed throughout the film. They meet in a bar in Hiroshima and commence a brief love affair, knowing that she is to leave Hiroshima the following day. The woman is an actress who has come to Hiroshima to make a film about peace and the man is an architect, professions that imply their respective roles in the commemoration and reconstruction of the city. They both openly confess that they are happily married, highlighting the forbidden nature of their encounter and its impossible future. This affair, set against the backdrop of a devastated city, incites the recollection of a traumatic memory from the woman's past that forms the central narrative of the film.

Prompted by the man, the woman tells the story of her first love affair with a German soldier that took place in the town of Nevers during the German occupation of France. The woman recalls that on the day of France's liberation, and also on the day the lovers were to flee the country, her lover was shot by a sniper (presumably a member of the resistance). Following his death her head was shaved in the town square, the punishment for collaborators. She was then locked in the cellar of her home by her parents; both for the shame she had caused and for her own protection. She was unable to contain her grief, the intensity of which resulted in the loss of her senses. She called out her lover's name incessantly and scratched the walls of the cellar until her hands bled. Only when she was able to silence her emotions was she let out of the cellar and allowed to return to her room. One night, her mother told her that she was to leave Nevers. Upon her arrival in Paris the next day, she recalls, 'the name of Hiroshima is in all the newspapers.'[9] For the woman, the atomic bombing holds vastly different personal connotations than it does for the Japanese man; for her the bombing represented the end of the war and coincided with her personal freedom.

The woman does not merely recall her traumatic past, but re-enacts and relives her experience of the past with her Japanese lover in the present. The simultaneous representation of two love stories and their gradual fusion into one breaks down the

[9] Duras, 1961, p. 67. All references from the text are to Marguerite Duras' published screenplay, translated into English by Richard Seaver and published in 1961, two years after the film's release. This translation often differs slightly from the film's English subtitles but the meaning of the text is essentially the same.

boundaries between time frames, places and identities, and constructs a process of remembrance that verges on psychosis. Indeed, by reliving her memory the woman experiences a repetition of the trauma that took place in the past. The Japanese man too has experienced trauma associated with death and loss; while he was away serving in the war he lost most of his family in the bombing of Hiroshima. Thus, what links the two narratives and the film's protagonists is the experience of witnessing death, personal survival, the feelings of guilt associated with survival, and the fear of forgetting the past.

Hiroshima mon amour is composed of five acts that differ markedly in their temporal and narrative structures due to the character's shifting relationship to memory (from recollection to re-enactment) as well as to the film's shifts in genre. The opening act itself comprises three separate sequences that interweave fact and fiction. The first sequence presents a close up shot of the lover's naked bodies entwined. A series of successive shots depict their bodies covered alternately with ashes and dew, and then sweat, 'in the throes of love or death.'[10] This image presents the juxtaposition of love/desire and death that is to permeate the film. The next sequence comprises Resnais' documentary footage. We see images of the hospital, the museum and filmed reconstructions of the bombing, images that pertain to the aftermath, preservation and commemoration of the catastrophe but fail to capture the event itself. Many of the images are intensely disturbing and evoke a sense of horror, but it is a horror that cannot be named or identified, a horror that defies absolute comprehension. The images flash onto the screen and into our consciousness at a speed too fast to allow time for contemplation. In a dramatic shift in genre and mood, the next sequence reveals the lovers involved in a light hearted conversation.

This opening act, which subverts audience expectation through its amalgamation of experimental, documentary and naturalistic filming techniques, is further complicated by a voice-over that challenges the authenticity of the visual images on the screen. As we observe the documentary footage of Hiroshima, we hear a voice-over, constructed as a conversation between the lovers. While she seemingly justifies the presence of the images through her descriptions of what she has seen during her visit to Hiroshima, saying, 'I saw *everything*. *Everything*,'[11] he contests her perceptions saying repeatedly, 'You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing.'[12]

The phrase 'you saw nothing in Hiroshima' can be read on a number of interconnected levels, all of which are central to an understanding of the film. Firstly, as a tourist, the woman, like the majority of the viewers of the film, witnesses the site (and sight) of the city long after the atomic bombing has taken place. She does not 'see' Hiroshima as an event, only its aftermath. Secondly, she has not seen 'Hiroshima' because the event has been mediated through photographs, films and archiving. Filmic reconstructions that are so realistic 'that the tourists cry,'[13] are dangerous, the film implies, because they give the tourists the impression that they have witnessed something of what actually happened when all that they have seen is the representation that stands in place of the real. Thirdly, the word 'nothing' is a negation. The footage of Hiroshima does not allow the atomic bomb survivors to enter

[10] *ibid*, p. 8.
[11] *ibid*, p. 15.
[12] *ibid*.
[13] *ibid*, p. 18.

the frame for more than a few seconds; they turn away from the gaze of the camera resisting characterisation. The very presence of the incomplete images points to the absence of all that cannot be incorporated of the atomic bomb experience, to all that exceeds the representational frame. This opening scene can be understood as a template for the film as a whole. The lovers' disagreement over the possibility of knowing and understanding Hiroshima extends to the film's broader concern as to whether a traumatic past can be represented or communicated to another.

Following the emphasis upon historical and collective traumatic experience in the first part of the film, the focus shifts to the realm of individual traumatic memory. Until her memories resurface in Hiroshima, the woman's traumatic experience remained repressed. This can be attributed to the splitting of the self, which trauma theorists have argued frequently occurs as a result of traumatic experience.[14] By forgetting her past trauma and refusing to incorporate it into her subjectivity in her present life, the woman creates a distinction between her two selves: the one that experienced the trauma in the past and the one that exists independently of the trauma in the present. While her present self is able to experience happiness and desire through her numerous love affairs (she indicates that this is not her first), her past self knows only one love, a love unto death. When the woman's lover died, she recalls, 'at that moment, and even afterward, yes even afterward, I can say that I couldn't feel the slightest difference between this dead body and mine.'[15] Her inability to differentiate between their two bodies results in a parallel inability to distinguish between his death and her living body. It is as though her past self dies with her lover and even after his body is taken away her sense of fusion with the death of the other continues. Her subsequent silence and repression of the past with her departure from Nevers suggests the construction of a new self. When she arrives in Paris on the day of the Hiroshima bombing she is effectively reborn.

Hiroshima mon amour depicts a series of shifts in the woman's relationship to memory as the narrative progresses, from initial flashes of involuntary memory fragments, to the representation of narrative memory, to a dramatic re-enactment of the scene of trauma. As the woman moves through each different stage of remembering, her changing relationship to her memories of the past have a profound effect on her subjectivity in the present. Thus *Hiroshima mon amour* depicts the way in which individual subjectivity is continually constructed and reconstructed through memory.

The woman's initial recollection of her lover's death occurs as an involuntary memory fragment that suddenly invades her consciousness. In the opening act of the film, as the woman watches the Japanese man sleep, the twitching of his hand activates the memory of her German lover, whose hand twitched similarly in the moments directly after he was shot. We see a brief flashback of the dead German soldier. At this point in the film, the flashback cannot yet be fully comprehended by the viewer and our confusion replicates the woman's sense of disorientation at the sudden intrusion of this repressed memory. As the memory occurs prior to her verbal reconstruction of the past it defies narrative integration, appearing only as a displaced fragment. The memory clearly evokes an emotional response in the woman but the

[14] For example, Roth, 1995; Brison, 1999; van Alphen, 1999.
[15] Duras, 1961, p. 65.

duration of the remembrance is slight, it lasts only a few film frames, and therefore she is able to prevent the image from maintaining a permanent hold over her consciousness.

The brief intrusion of this image from the past differs markedly from the next recollection of Nevers, which occurs some time later in the Japanese man's home. This time the woman has control over her memories as she consciously recalls the love affair in an idealised fashion. Like the opening description of Hiroshima that emphasised the sites of the city (the museum, the hospital), the initial flashbacks of Nevers focus upon the geographical landscape of the town. The woman supplies the Japanese man with a series of facts about the town; she says, 'Nevers. Forty thousand inhabitants. Built like a capital – (but). A child can walk around it.'[16] Just as she is a foreigner in Hiroshima, he is a virtual tourist to Nevers. The woman's initial recollections of her German lover are similarly devoid of emotional resonance. They convey nothing of his appearance or her feelings for him, but are told exclusively in relation to place; she says, 'At first we met in barns. Then among the ruins. And then in rooms.'[17] In the visual flashback we are shown the places to which she refers; we see shots of the lovers entering the barns and ruins, but are rarely permitted inside. Her story is depicted from an objective point of view with the emphasis upon the landscape in which the affair took place rather than the details of the affair itself.

The central difference between the two memories discussed above is that while the first is a traumatic involuntary memory, the second series of memories are represented in the form of a narrative. Narrative memories are formed from a series of past moments that are converted into a story which progresses along a linear chronology. Whether actual or imagined, the remembering subject masters her memories and reconstructs them through speech or writing. As Michael Roth explains, 'narrative memory integrates specific events into existing mental schemes. In so doing the specific events are decharged, rendered less potent as they assume a place *in relation* to other parts of the past.' [18] In contrast to the intrusive image of her lover's hand, which is depicted as a fragmented moment, displaced from time, the narrative memory of her love affair is re-incorporated into the flow of time as she reconstructs it verbally for her listener. Unlike traumatic memory, in which the past is relived in the present, narrative recollections locate memory in the past. This memory is therefore, in Roth's words, 'rendered less potent,' because it is firmly located in the past and does not impede upon her subjectivity in the present.

Following the woman's initial narrative memories of Nevers, recalled in the Japanese man's home, another temporal and qualitative shift occurs in her remembrance of her past when she resumes her story at a bar later the same evening. This scene resembles the psychoanalytic scenario as the man pushes the woman to continue her verbal recollection of her past with the intent of revealing the moment of trauma that she has repressed. The woman does not merely remember the past; she relives it by re-enacting her traumatic memory with her Japanese lover. He becomes an active participant in her re-enactment when he adopts the role of her German lover; he says 'when you are in the cellar, am I dead?'[19] initiating a troubling substitution of

[16] *ibid*, p. 53.
[17] *ibid*, p. 41.
[18] Roth, 1995, p. 98, emphasis in original.
[19] Duras, 1961, p. 54.

identities. In strong contrast to the earlier narrative memory, here the distinction between time frames is distorted as the past trauma is repeated in the present.

As the scene in the bar progresses, a series of psychoanalytic concepts are presented as symptoms: repetition compulsion (her need to re-enact rather than merely recall the past), regression (to an infantile state when she is unable to use her hands and the man has to raise her glass for her), substitution and transference (she substitutes the Japanese man's identity for that of her German lover and transfers her feelings for one man onto the other), and neuroses (as the distinction between past and present begins to dissolve).[20] The Japanese man willingly participates in the transference by adopting the role of her German lover. He also encourages her regression and neuroses, for it is he who instigates the conflation of the past and present. Rather than attempting to resolve the symptoms or trauma, both the woman and the man acquiesce to their destructive impulses to repeat the past. They seem to experience masochistic and sadistic pleasures from their re-enactment of the woman's pain and suffering. For the Japanese man, whose motivations are somewhat self interested, the pleasure stems from his final possession of her memory. By stepping into the role of her German lover he writes himself into her history and identity, and also gains access to her unique memory that he wants to call his own.

The woman's masochistic pleasure can be linked to her narcissistic obsession with mourning. She suffers from what Kristeva calls melancholia or narcissistic depression, wherein sadness is not directed towards a specific object but rather manifested as 'the most archaic expression on an unsymbolizable, unnameable, narcissistic wound.'[21] 'For such narcissistic depressed persons' Kristeva continues, 'sadness is really the sole object; more precisely it is a substitute object they become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another.'[22] This is a particularly apt description of the woman of *Hiroshima mon amour,* who cherishes and guards her sadness like a precious object that (until now) was hers alone. The melancholic suffers from an inability to communicate, for her grief cannot be shared or represented in the social realm. Throughout the scene in the bar, fragments of the woman's traumatic memories are depicted in flashbacks; she remembers that while she was locked in the cellar she ceased to be aware of the passing of time and suffered from an inability to speak. She either remains silent or makes indecipherable noises, like the child in Kristeva's semiotic *chora* who has not yet gained access to language or the symbolic order. In her state of melancholia, the woman's subjectivity is cut off from the social/symbolic realm and her grief is uncommunicable. For the woman the cellar is simply 'eternity'[23] which, like the unconscious, exists independent of society, history and time.

With her Japanese lover, the woman regains speech, thereby embarking upon the painful journey of dealing with the trauma. The conversion of a traumatic memory into a narrative within the psychoanalytic process is supposed to diffuse the trauma and thereby enable the remembering subject to commence the process of recovery and re-enter the social realm. While the narrative framing of the film, which is restricted to a twenty-four hour period, necessarily prohibits the resolution of the healing

[20] Higgins, 1996, p. 37.
[21] Kristeva, 1989, p. 12.
[22] *ibid*.
[23] Duras, 1961, p. 59.

process, it might be argued that the woman has just begun the process of negotiating her trauma. However, I suggest that *the way* in which the past is re-enacted is not conducive to the healing process. Further, if this woman can be read as a melancholic subject, as I have suggested, her attachment to the lost object and her desire to compulsively repeat the traumatic past may well prevent recovery, subjectivity and agency.

As the woman re-enacts her past in the present, her sense of self again becomes increasingly unstable. She regresses, falling back into a state in which her subjectivity is flawed and incomplete as a result of loss. The loss she suffered was part of her self and thus she mourns, not an external object, but that which Kristeva refers to as 'the Thing,' which, like the Lacanian Real, cannot be symbolised, represented or replaced. Kristeva writes, 'knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing.'[24] The melancholic woman of *Hiroshima mon amour* constructs situations and rituals to navigate around the loss or lack which can never be filled. She experiences an unnameable loss/wound that results in a self-destructive regression comparable to that which Kristeva, after Freud, calls the death drive, defined as 'a tendency to return to the inorganic state and homeostasis.'[25] The presence of the death drive is realised in the woman's masochistic punishment and loss of the self; she says 'deform me, make me ugly'[26] conveying her desire to be absorbed and emotionally disfigured. She also displays ambivalence towards the lost object, which Kristeva describes as a characteristic of the melancholic;[27] 'you destroy me' the woman says, and in the very next breath, 'you're so good for me.'[28]

Freud's understanding of the death drive is implicitly connected to his theory of repetition compulsion; he writes 'there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle.'[29] He argues that the patient suffering from traumatic memories often repeats the repressed memory rather than '*remembering* it as something belonging to the past.'[30] Freud implies that the danger of repeating the past is that the subject experiences a breakdown in the distinction between her past traumatic experience and her present identity. Her present identity thus becomes integrated with the trauma. The compulsion to repeat results in what Freud calls 'unpleasure', as well as a loss of subjectivity or disintegration of the self. Indeed, the woman's repetition of the past is not motivated by a desire to overcome the past, but by a need to relive the traumatic experience to its final conclusion through a symbolic killing of the self.

The woman's regression creates a fusion of past and present, depicted cinematically towards the end of the film when a series of shots weave together the locations of Hiroshima and Nevers. The images are portrayed from the woman's point of view as she mentally fuses the two locations into one. In a voice-over she says, 'this city was

[24] Kristeva, 1989, p. 13.
[25] *ibid*, p. 16.
[26] Duras, 1961, p. 25.
[27] Kristeva, 1989, p. 11.
[28] Duras, 1961, pp. 25, 77.
[29] Freud, 1955 [1920], p. 22.
[30] *ibid*, p. 18.

made to the size of love'[31], and it is ambiguous as to which city (and which love) she is referring. For the woman the distinction between the two places has become extremely tenuous as by the end of the film both Hiroshima and Nevers have come to signify trauma, loss and impossible love.

This interconnection of the past and present is even more pronounced in the final moments of the film, in which the characters lose their coherent individual identities altogether; the woman says to the man 'Hi-ro-shi-ma. That's your name,' to which he replies 'That's my name. Yes. Your name is Nevers. Ne-vers in France.'[32] Here both characters are defined entirely in relation to the places of their origin, or more specifically the places of their originary traumatic memories. Thus the woman's identity is merged with Nevers and the memory of trauma and loss that it contains. 'Hiroshima' now functions as a signifier for three different signifieds: a geographical location, a traumatic historical event and a person, her Japanese lover, who has become synonymous with both place and trauma.

The woman's obsession with her traumatic past results in madness, the loss of identity and the detachment of the self from the social world. As Kristeva argues, 'madness is a space of antisocial, apolitical, and paradoxically free individuation.'[33] In her state of madness, the woman experiences a fluidity in her sense of self because she exists outside reality and outside time. While this realisation of a fluid identity might be read in positive terms,[34] this fluidity is also paradoxically a trap that prevents her from achieving involvement with the external public world of society and politics. The woman's fusion of identities and merging of the past and present results in a subjectivity that is not linked to social or historical factors, because she exists outside history.

While history provides the backdrop to the film's narrative, as Kristeva observes, 'history is unobtrusive and later disappears' giving way to a melancholic narrative of personal suffering.[35] The problem with the shift from a focus on historical trauma in the first part of the film, to the memory of individual trauma in the later part, is that history and politics are subsumed by the personal narrative. In Kristeva's words, 'private suffering absorbs political horror in the subject's microcosm.'[36] Indeed, as the film progresses, the 'political horror' of the events that took place in both Hiroshima and Nevers are in part absorbed by the memory of personal suffering. As Kristeva argues, 'the Nazi invasion, the atomic explosion – are assimilated to the extent of being measured only by the human suffering they cause.'[37] Further, these historical events are viewed through a personal lens, thus imbuing them with the status of an individual memory rather than that of a collective or cultural memory of historical human suffering.

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[31] Duras, 1961, p. 77.
[32] *ibid*, p. 83.
[33] Kristeva, 1989, p. 135.
[34] French feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous suggest that representations of female subjectivity as fluid serve to challenge phallocentric notions of the unified subject. See for example, Irigaray, 1985, and Cixous, 1981.
[35] Kristeva, 1989, p. 234.
[36] *ibid*.
[37] *ibid*.

The focus on individual memory validates the legitimacy of the personal narrative but overshadows the extent of the historical traumas on a collective and cultural level. For Kristeva, the central problem is that the emphasis on the private realm of experience demotes the importance of public space as the space of history and politics. She states, the 'private domain gains a solemn dignity that depreciates the public domain.'[38] She continues,

> Public life becomes seriously severed from reality whereas private life, on the other hand, is emphasized to the point of filling the whole of the real and invalidating any other concern. The new world, necessarily political, is unreal. We are living the reality of a new suffering world.[39]

Kristeva's critical observations of the emphasis on private suffering and the subsequent subsuming of political events in *Hiroshima mon amour,* reveal some points of convergence with Andreas Huyssen's critique of contemporary trauma theory. Huyssen argues that, 'to collapse memory into trauma . . . would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering and loss. It would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition.'[40] As I have suggested above, it is precisely such a 'compulsive repetition' that occurs in *Hiroshima mon amour*. The central female character is indeed denied human agency. She exhibits a melancholic desire to subject herself to suffering which is suggestive of an internal nihilism that prevents her from being able to imagine a future or sufficiently engage with the external social word.

Hiroshima mon amour provides a complex and fascinating depiction of individual memory. It is also an important early example of a text that pre-empted the crisis of history through its suggestion that certain historical events are fundamentally unrepresentable. History is thereby displaced from the discursive realm and memory is imbued with a privileged status as the primary means by which to recapture the past, as well as the most ethical and truthful method through which to re-examine historical trauma. The film largely rejects historical discourses for a more fluid and less hegemonic depiction of memory that emphasises subjective and intersubjective experience. However, I have argued that the process of remembrance depicted renders the film's central female character increasingly trapped within a compulsive repetition of the past. The melancholic female subject, consumed with her private pain and suffering, possesses limited subjectivity and agency with which to recover from her traumatic past.

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[38] Kristeva, 1989, p.135
[39] *ibid*, p. 235
[40] Huyssen, 2003, p. 8

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